Spirituality/Opposing views clash

From D1

seems as amazed by the ministry's growth as anyone.

"It's certainly a move of God's spirit," he said.

Battles continue over homosexuality

Mel White, a gay minister from Dallas, believes God loves homosexuals just as they are. Focus on the Family, a Colorado Springs ministry, says God loves gays, but not their sin.

In July, the opposing views grabbed headlines as White fasted and camped out for a week in front of Focus' headquarters. During his "fast for understanding," White criticized Focus for promoting anti-gay rhetoric which he said resulted in actual violence against homosexuals. Focus on the Family President James Dobson, who was out of the country during White's protest, fought back in a full-page newspaper ad.

The result was a standoff which one conservative magazine described as "a state of siege from radical homosexual activists."

White now says that his protest only deepened divisions over homosexuality and was "totally ineffective at promoting understanding."

He says he has been reading the gospel of Matthew and books by Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi to "see how to build bridges of understanding" and demonstrate "how Christians can act without acting rudely."

But White doesn't rule out the possibility a 1995 fast in front of Pat Robertson's Virginia headquarters.

If White's visit failed to change Focus' focus, it did boost the morale of local homosexuals. "It improved people's sense of worth as gay and lesbian Christians," says Nori Rost, pastor of the gay-friendly Pikes Peak Metropolitan Community Church.

Meanwhile, Focus continued to battle what it calls the gay agenda through broadcasts, publications and political activism. Focus campaigned for passage of initiatives to limit gay rights in Oregon and Idaho. Both measures were narrowly defeated.

Focus also published "The Social Significance of Homosexuality: Questions and Answers," a study that, among other things, challenges recent scientific studies which claim to have found a biological basis for homosexual orientation. Focus officials hope the publication will help shape public policy on homosexual rights, but they say it does not demonize gays.

"We need to care for the individual and not be judgmental," says report author Larry Burtoft, an employee of Focus' Public Policy division. "But at the same time, society needs to be very careful."

Colorado played host to other groups involved in the continuing debate over gay rights:

■ In May, Colorado for Family Values, which wrote Amendment 2, hosted a conference which brought anti-gay rights activists from around the country to Colorado Springs for strategy sessions and networking.

■ Exodus International, a California-based association of ministries, sponsored a national conference in Fort Collins to teach people involved in helping homosexuals change their orientation. About 400 people attended.

Peace breaks out in Springs

In April, members of Trinity Baptist Church proved the power of forgiveness when they ended a bitter yearlong feud over the firing of longtime minister Lewis Harvey.

Harvey's firing by church leaders led to tensions among members. Police were called to a number of church meetings and services.

But since then, church members have reconciled, and so have Harvey and the Rev. George Duncan, Trinity's new pastor.

In October, Harvey preached at Trinity to celebrate Duncan's first year in the pulpit. And in November, Duncan preached at the first anniversary service at New Resurrection Missionary Baptist Church, which Harvey founded.

"We're all human beings who make mistakes," says Duncan. "But what this demonstrates to me is that the church has the capacity to put things behind us and go on."

Trinity wasn't the only example of reconciliation in Colorado Springs this year:

■ In October, Richard Hanifen, bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Colorado Springs, sponsored a conference on interfaith cooperation which featured Rabbi Howard Hirsch of Temple Shalom and Ted Haggard of New Life Church as speakers. About 600 people attended.

■ Hanifen, Hirsch, Haggard and other local pastors and religious leaders continued to meet monthly as the Community Concerns Group, a group that was founded in 1993 in response to local religious divisions over Colorado's Amendment 2, which prohibits laws protecting gays from discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"We have broken down a lot of barriers by simply getting to know each other on a sustained basis," said Hirsch.

■ And Citizens Project, a local group promoting religious pluralism and the separation of church and state, created Dialogue Dinners to give liberals and conservatives a forum for discussing their differences face-to-face.

More than 100 people took part in Dialogue Dinners this year, meeting in groups of 8-10 to discuss their differences.

"It's not that we try to make each other agree on every issue," said Glen Paauw, product development manager for International Bible Society. "What we try to do is learn how to get along with each other in spite of our differences.

"The Dialogue Dinners are an experiment in what's going to have to happen if pluralism is going to work in this country."

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